



Mariner Training

Seaspan Training Program

By Steve Thompson

In 2004, while reviewing the seniority lists for both the officers and unlicensed crew personnel at British Columbia's Seaspan International Ltd. (Seaspan), we quickly came to the realization that the marine industry was not exempt from the looming 'baby boomer' crisis. It was determined that the average age of the licensed crew members was about 58 years, with the unlicensed personnel not far behind.

We noted that over the next 17 years, 65 percent of the company's officers would leave the industry due to mandatory retirement.

In light of the fact that most of the senior Seaspan employees started their careers at the Deckhand level and progressively moved through the ranks to their current positions, it was felt that some of their best employees had 'paid their dues'. These employees knew the equipment, procedures and overall philosophy of the Company. As such, in order to build qualified officers for the future, the company had to start at the 'grass roots'.

With the blessing of Steve Frasher, the CEO of Seaspan, we immediately embarked on developing a comprehensive Deckhand Training Program. To help in the development and implementation, I recruited the assistance of a senior Deckhand, Norman Scott and a recently retired Master, Al Berg.

Union Approved

In order to qualify for the training program, candidates must submit their applications to Seaspan through their respective Union - either the Seafarers' International Union of Canada (SIU) or the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, Local 400 (ILWU), Marine Section. They are paid a specified training rate during their time associated in the actual training program.

The current requirements for a Deckhand in Canada for vessels under 200 gross tons are an A-1 Med Course (3

Day), and a Food Safe Certificate. With the cooperation of the two unlicensed Unions (the SIU and ILWU), Seaspan raised its company standards to require a minimum of a Bridge Watchman's Certificate (13 week course), Food Safe Certification and a D.O.T. approved medical.

Seaspan managed to salvage the front portion of one of its barges destined for scrap. Applicants are required to climb a Jacob's ladder and be able to demonstrate the necessary physical strength to pull a bridle from approximately 12 feet below to a bollard. The remainder of the physical testing is completed at Seaspan's



The recruiting process initially starts with an interview, whereby the applicants are asked a number of questions and backgrounds and certification are thoroughly checked.

If the applicant is successful at the interview, he moves on to the second phase. This involves a comprehensive physical test, developed by Seaspan's in-house kinesiologist, Kim Skeath. The design of this physical test was based specifically on the direct demands of a Deckhand, working in the Fraser River, Vancouver Harbor and ocean going tugs. Part of the physical testing is done at Vancouver Shipyards, where

in-house gym with the use of weights and heart monitoring equipment.

Aptitude Test

The second phase also requires each applicant to complete an aptitude test. A Richmond, BC-based company developed this test with the key focus on safety and the ability to interact with others for long periods of time within confined quarters.

An applicant who successfully passes both the physical and aptitude tests is then required to attend a one-day Safety Orientation seminar. Applicants are then scheduled into the training program,

which consists of an 11 day period on a harbor-based tug with six participants, the Senior Training Coordinator and Training Master.

Every day of this phase, the participant is evaluated on a point structure system. If they do not hit the required level at the end of week one, they are removed from the program. At the end of the 11 days, if they do not amass the designated point criteria, as well as pass the written and practical exams, they do not attain a pass for the course.

Some of the tasks taught during this program are the tying up of chip barges, oil barges, log barges; practical boom boat implementation; coupling; deep sea gear training; and other related sea going tasks (inclusive of splicing ropes, line throwing and other similar components). However, the main focus of the 11-day program is integration of safe working processes mandated by the company.

Participants who have been successful in this level move into the final stage of their training and are sent to either an ocean going or harbor/river tug, dependent on their desire and skill level. At this time, they go out as a supernumerary for a period from two to three weeks.

Once a candidate successfully completes the course and they are hired as a full time employee, their performance is continually further evaluated for a period of six months.

Seaspan International will only consider eligible for employment participants of this extensive training program, and/or those current union members who have experience with other companies and challenge the Seaspan final exam.

Good Reception

At the conclusion of the second year of the program, the Company has assessed the program, which has a suc-

cessful completion rate of approximately 52 percent.

After the initial two or three courses, we received very favorable reports back from the Masters related to the skill level and deck awareness of these employees coming into the Company. There was, however, one overall area of concern. This related to the cooking abilities of the newly recruited Deckhands. For this reason, a cooking course was set up and conducted aboard a deactivated ocean going tug that is tied up at the Seaspan dock. This course was voluntary for any of the new recruits and consisted of a five-day period where they cooked breakfast, lunch and dinner.

This course had an unexpected spin-off where, during the first few days of the initial course, it became evident that the six participants involved could not possibly eat the amount of food they were preparing. In light of this, Captain Thompson encouraged upper management and other office based employees to attend the vessel to sample a meal for themselves. It has been found that both the cooking students and management have enjoyed each other's company and, for the most part, the food. The cooking program was so well accepted that Seaspan offered it to all of their shipboard Deckhands. It is still available to them at any time. The program is not only based

on cooking, but also daily nutritional requirements, elements of food management and the at sea organizational skills of providing meals on time in a work environment.

Continuing Education

The Deckhand Training Program has been so successful that other companies have been inquiring if it is possible for them to attain space in the course for their own future employees.

In 2006, Seaspan submitted the Deckhand Training Program to the Canadian Society of Safety Engineers for their review. It was awarded the top designation for young worker hiring programs in Western Canada.

The Company is not stopping at the Deckhand Training Program. An unlicensed employee who is getting close to the required sea time for attending school to attain higher designation is offered a Boat Handling Course. The Company additionally offers Deckhand to Mate and Mate to Master vessel handling courses.

We have found that, over the two-year period, the retention of successful applicants has been extremely high. The Company is proud of the program and looking forward to continuing to having qualified, professional employees on board all of their vessels. **PMM**

Captain Thompson began his career in the industry at the age of 15 working for the False Creek Tug and Barge Company as Deckhand. He was hired by Seaspan in 1989 in the capacity of Deckhand and worked up to his Masters Designation in 1993. In 1996, he came ashore in the position of Vessel Dispatcher. In 1999, he moved into the position of Port Captain, and in 2000, he shifted to Assistant Manager, Marine Personnel. In 2001, Captain Thompson assumed the role of Manager, Marine Personnel, and this year, he was promoted to Operations Manager.

Captain Thompson is currently responsible for the crewing of 500 marine personnel and 50 tugs.

